

BOBBY BAKER AND THE SENATE

Interview #4

Thursday, June 7, 1990

RITCHIE: I wanted to follow up on the conference on Senate leadership that we held about two weeks ago. I wondered if, having listened to those papers on Johnson and Mansfield, you had any thoughts about the effectiveness of their leadership, or the way that historians are beginning to look at them, years later?

ELSON: Well, actually, I thought that Howard Shuman did a better job than I thought he would. I thought he did a fairly accurate job of portraying Johnson and describing his personality. [Howard E. Shuman, "Lyndon B. Johnson: The Senate's Powerful Persuader," in Richard A. Baker and Roger H. Davidson, eds., *First Among Equals: Outstanding Senate Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1991).] I was pleasantly surprised. He, of course, thinks that Johnson was a better president than he was leader. I would disagree. I thought he was an extremely fine leader, when you consider the balances, and the changes that were taking place. Where he became an unusually good president was because of the momentum he received as a result of Kennedy's assassination, because all those programs in some form or fashion had been introduced by the Kennedys, in the Kennedy administration for the most part, and they languished and weren't going many places because there was that reluctance to help him along. Then, after the assassination, Johnson was smart enough to exploit all the feeling in the country, and moved all his legislation as well as the Kennedy legislation through, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and all the Great Society programs, but a lot of that legislation was already there.

As opposed to his successor, Mansfield, who is such a decent human being. And of course, we always have to go back to that Class of '58, that huge new group of senators who came in, and the different majorities that probably forced Mansfield to do things a little differently. Maybe he had to, but I—well, let me put it this way: any senator is a very powerful human being politically, and depending on how he uses that, he becomes more equal than others. I've always said, if you give me six senators I could

tie up this country until they'd go berserk. Mansfield, in sort of letting everyone have their head, I don't know whether he really needed to do that. I think he could have been more forceful in carrying on, or bringing things along. He was a man of consensus. I think he gave too much leeway to individual members. To pass legislation, with some of the rules changes, I thought that he could have still used some of Johnson's forcefulness. Though he could be tough, I mean he certainly was not fearful of anyone. I think it was just his whole philosophy. Of course, you also have to remember he bent over backwards as a result of Johnson having been his predecessor. And then you had the Bobby Baker affair and some things like that that changed the make-up of the operation of the Senate chamber. You know, [Frank] Valeo went in. He was certainly no Bobby Baker. And Mansfield didn't let him. He wanted to have someone there that was "clean as a hound's tooth"—someone else said that.

But I thought all in all I really enjoyed that conference. I was there the entire time, and I thought most everyone did well, except for that last panel. I disagreed with some of the things that they were saying. What in the hell were they talking about? Well, I'll have to look at my notes, I made some notes on that. But between Mansfield and Johnson, their styles were so different, and I guess the circumstances were too, but I thought Mansfield could have been a stronger leader than he actually was.

RITCHIE: One theme that ran through some of those papers, the way I heard them at least, was that the office of majority leader doesn't carry with it a lot of intrinsic power. It depends on what each individual person holding that position does with the responsibility and whatever authorities there are. Actually, it seems to vary considerably, and it's not as if becoming majority leader means that you are. . .

ELSON: Automatically powerful. Well, I think we're seeing that probably true today with [George] Mitchell. It does depend on the person. Of course, Johnson used everything to accumulate power. Every committee, he put people in the Policy Committee, expanded it. He felt that he should have as many people as his little heart desired to do anything, all he wanted. So when he left to become vice president, I didn't see for instance that Mansfield wanted to give up any of the space [laughs] or turn anything back particularly, but he certainly wasn't grabbing for things like Lyndon did to expand his power.

When you go into that, first of all to get elected they go through their own little in-house voting process which is probably just as hard a campaign as some of your own political campaigns. To want the leadership you have to be a unique character, an individual, because as lots of members came out, and it came out in the conference in some of the remarks that were made during that sessions, that being the leader was not necessarily an advantage, particularly if you were a southerner who in those days had political problems with desegregation and all the other things. And if the same party is in power in the White House and you have to defend them, and you have your own political problems, it's not necessarily a blessing. So it has to be sort of a unique individual to play that. It can be really tough, and we've seen some majority leaders like Lucas and McFarland who have been defeated, and we saw what happened to Russell Long when he was whip and got blindsided. It's not a blessing, and it does depend on the individual.

I guess I can say I go back to McFarland days. I was here before he closed his office, but I had known all about him of course from being from Arizona. Then watching the rest of them operate, they all had their distinct styles. I think that Gorbachev would be one hell of a leader in this body because of his personality, and his persuasion, and his understanding of the use of power. He's relaxed with it. And I think Lyndon was definitely relaxed with it in the sense that he loved it. He did work at it twenty-four hours a day, and had such driving ambition. No question, he wanted the top spot in the world, being president of the United States. It was limitless what he wanted to do.

Mansfield was an entirely different personality, the professor type. And coming from a state like Montana I think that's why he was there so long—you didn't have some of the problems that someone else might have from a different region of the country. I just thought in little things, he—Mansfield I'm talking about—could have exercised more leadership, not necessarily in the Johnson style. People respected him and he could have used his reservoir of good will and respect to move things along a little more forcefully.

RITCHIE: Let me ask you one question about Hayden as chairman of Appropriations under both of those men. Would the Senate Majority Leader, like Johnson or Mansfield, defer to the chairman of the Appropriations Committee to

handle the appropriations bill when they came up, or would they handle it themselves? Or was there a difference between Johnson and Mansfield on that?

ELSON: Well, I don't think we ever had any trouble with the appropriations bill because when they came out of committee the majority and minority worked very well together. It was very professional. Normally the subcommittee chairman would handle it on the floor. When they took them out they had no difficulty moving those along. Of course they had some priorities. I didn't see where the leadership got involved, outside of scheduling.

The one bill that always came up last, in every damn Congress, was always the foreign aid bill. That would be the one that everyone wanted to attack. The interesting thing, if you'd look at the minutes of the Senate Appropriations Committee, never were the votes very strong for the foreign aid bill in that committee. If they had voted their convictions, foreign aid would have been in more trouble than it was even in those days, and it was always a problem. It would always get down and hold up the sine die adjournment of the Congress, and there would always be a conference early in the morning. It would be Ellender, Hayden, and old Otto Passman fighting. The senator was sort of the one moderating it between the two of them from Louisiana. Neither one really had his heart in foreign aid. But if you look at those minutes, which I did once. The votes would be 14-11. How that happened was when they were marking up those bills in those days, you did it in executive session. So Carl Hayden would get his southern friends on the committees to give him their proxies, so he would vote them and would always have two or three votes to get the majority to get the damn bill out and pass it. Then they'd keep their mouths shut pretty well when it got to the floor, except for some of those who were making issues. That's how that used to happen.

Anyhow, if I understood your question about whether there was any leadership will exerted in trying to do something outside of Carl Hayden when he was chairman—the thing about Carl Hayden, as I look back on him, he had this incredible memory for detail and members' request, and most of those things were all taken care of before the bill ever came to the floor. The senator had pretty much greased, or taken away any potential opposition in most cases in the committee when they were marking it up—from the subcommittee to the full committee before they reported it. So I don't recall

any real problems. Oh, there might have been in their leadership meetings, saying we need more money for the space program, he'd put it in. I just can't recall any real difficulty there with the leadership at all, either under Johnson or Mansfield.

RITCHIE: You mentioned in passing that Hayden could count on his southern friends. It strikes me that the southwestern senators had particularly good ties with the southern senators at that stage.

ELSON: Well, for lots of reasons, particularly in the senator's case. My God, the length of time he was around here, he knew them all. He'd been here longer than most of them. When they first came to the Senate he always tried to be helpful to them, not only in their assignments, but showing them the ropes and how things happen. So he was very close to them that way. But also for instance I'd say from the time I was with him up until about 1965 I would say that our office and [James] Eastland, and [John] Stennis' office pretty much wrote all the cotton legislation from the farm bill.

Something that I think is fascinating about that is that our cotton farmers in Arizona were getting all this cheap water and reclamation, and they could get yields twice that what you could in the South, except maybe for the Delta, and fine-quality cotton, both upland and long staple. We produced it, and also in Texas along the Rio Grande. All our farmers, of course, wanted to wipe out all those poor southern farmers, and Carl Hayden, when he met with the cotton growers, or our own farmers, he would say, "There's no way that I'm going to be a party to harming our southern friends. This has been their tradition, they've got their allotments." He'd come right out. So we never had any—oh, we had some problems, anytime you try to handle regional issues like that—but he always went out of his way, particularly for the small cotton farmers in the South. The Delta farmers down the Mississippi Delta could pretty much handle themselves, they could compete worldwide as well as nationally. Farmers are awfully difficult to deal with. You can hardly get them to agree on the time of day, but because of the way he handled himself, and took them into consideration, he was always close to them.

Also I found it fascinating that say on civil rights, or on invoking cloture, Carl Hayden believed in unlimited debate. I think only once did he vote for cloture, and that

was on some space program, I forget what it was. I think I told you why that was the case, because when they wanted to bring in the Arizona-New Mexico territory back in 1905 or '06, someone got up and filibustered so that the territories could decide whether they wanted to come in separately or alone. So it delayed Arizona's admission into the States for another six years, but at the same time he probably would never have been in Congress or a United States Senator if it had not been for that delay. So he had real practical reasons for being in favor of unlimited debate.

But what I started to say about what was fascinating to me, I could see him cast votes—talk about a good vote counter, Carl Hayden was one of the best. When he knew that a piece of social legislation didn't have the votes, he'd occasionally vote with his southern friends. So he looked a little like a conservative, and he might be even a little prejudiced on a Civil Rights issue for instance, but he knew it wasn't going anywhere, so he would vote along and build up brownie points that way. It used to frustrate a lot of my Republican friends out in Arizona—here was this man who probably voted for every aggressive piece of social legislation that was ever enacted into law, and then he had this reputation of being a conservative. One of the reasons is that over the years, because he was such a good vote counter, and knew that it wasn't timely even if they were making a little progress, he would vote with his southern friends. It was also politically good for him at home in the West, but also built up a good rapport with the southerners, and in those days of course there was pretty much a one-party South. It was all Democratic, so when they got up here they rose up through the ranks of seniority and stayed there for a long time, as we all know. But I thought it was very skillful and good politics and also built up great relationships.

RITCHIE: In the '50s the measurement that southern senators used was how you stood on cloture, and Carl Hayden stood with them on that.

ELSON: Yeah.

RITCHIE: Was there any quid pro quo? Did they support issues like oil and gas and water programs that he wanted, in return?

ELSON: Yeah, but I don't think it was in his case a quid pro quo as much as a lot of the programs that the senator was interested in were also programs that the

South and others were interested in: roads, farming legislation, minerals, and all that. We had an awful lot in common with the South. In the way Carl Hayden worked, by the time he had something that he was really interested in, the groundwork had been laid so well, years before, either in hearings in the Appropriations Committee when they were coming up, seed money he'd put in, you know, a little fifty thousand dollars here, a hundred thousand dollars there for a study. It could be on anything. He would stick it in there as a study, and then the next go-around he'd say, "Okay, what do you need to finish this study? Or when do we go to the next stage?"

We even did this on private bills, immigration bills for instance, when it became a racket to keep someone who was illegally in the country, everyone was throwing in private bills until they changed all that. He wouldn't do that. In fact, every immigration bill that he ever put in—this is insignificant, but I think it shows what sort of a man he was--we would have done so much work on that thing. We wouldn't even put in the bill, or we might have put it in to hold up until we could get all the work, but every private relief bill he ever put in was enacted, because of that very same approach. We had so much information, checked it all out, and by the time we went to the committee with it, the work had all been done.

That's the way he approached everything. It was just beautiful to watch. That's when I think I said before he'd be willing to take that half-step, or quarter-step, looking down the line maybe five, ten years. Talk about looking at lead-times! Of course maybe it was because of the time it took to develop projects for the West, reclamation projects. But he took advantage of all sorts of things, like during World War II, I know we have a couple of irrigation projects and one in particular down near Yuma that wouldn't exist, but he tied it in with the military because the winds blew sand onto the fields, and it was causing safety problems, so they irrigated. Now it's some of the wealthiest land in the country, all citrus, and it was built around the base to protect it from the sands. You know, he'd do things like that. For instance, I remember that the Grand Coulee Dam was never authorized. You know how that was authorized? It wasn't even a whole sentence, he stuck it into one of the appropriations bills for the Pacific northwest. That huge facility went in and was authorized that way.

Carl Hayden was a builder, with all the regions of the country, and of course in the South you had all the channelization of the Mississippi and all the rivers and harbors

stuff in the midwest. And he was always helping [Robert] Kerr on all his big projects that revolutionized that part of the world—a seaport in the middle of the country! [laughs] So his position on cloture I think really did help him with his southern friends. But as I say, it was more a matter of principle with him, and I don't think he expected a quid pro quo. He really believed in protecting minorities, and had seen too often how easy it was to get a majority to run over people. He felt there were always ways of working out in time, reasonable men could work out their differences, as it eventually happened in Civil Rights. The southerners finally saw the writing on the wall. In fact, in my opinion the South's made more progress in that area than the North and the major cities in the country. I used to get a kick out of our friends from Illinois and New York and some of the other places who gerrymandered school districts. You know, you looked at New York and you'd see these funny fingers going here and there. They didn't handle their race problems very well. I think the South has come a long way since I first came back here, in those areas.

RITCHIE: Hayden was one of those who let the majority leader know he could have his vote on cloture in '64 if they needed it, but he preferred not to.

ELSON: Well, he voted for the Civil Rights Act of '64.

RITCHIE: But he held off on the cloture vote.

ELSON: On cloture, right.

RITCHIE: Until it really got down to whether they really needed his vote.

ELSON: Yeah, and he would have gone again on that. The other time that he voted for cloture, which surprised the hell out of me, because it caught me by surprise, I don't even think they needed his vote on whatever it was. It seemed to me it had something to do with the space program, but I could be wrong. I'll have to check that out.

RITCHIE: One of the reasons why I raised the question about the quid pro quo, was that I remember when Howard Shuman told me about Senator Douglas' frustrations of trying to get on the Finance Committee. He said that Richard Russell

as chairman of the Steering Committee basically wanted to know how anybody was going to stand on cloture, and on oil and gas depletion allowance. Those were the two criteria. If you voted right on those issues you got on the Finance Committee. If you didn't go along with it, they found all sorts of excuses to keep you off the Finance Committee.

ELSON: Well, that's pretty true. Now, Carl Hayden, as long as I can remember, was always on the Steering Committee. But of course, Lyndon was on there too, and he was the one who was more interested in the oil and gas thing. The southerners were interested in the cloture issue. It was a mixture not only of the temperament of the South, but also I think they knew they were a minority in a lot of things, and that they also believed in it in principle as well as for practical reasons. So, yeah, that was typical. But I think under Johnson the rules changed to give new senators major committee assignments—they used to have to serve their time on the District of Columbia Committee or some other minor committee—they did change that. The Steering Committee tried to make committee assignments geographically, to balance it out so it wasn't totally weighed in one area of the country's favor. But there's no question that that was one of the considerations, those subjects were very big to the people who were serving on the Steering Committee, particularly for new members.

So I'm sure it was frustrating to someone like Senator Douglas, who had the background, the expertise, and all that, being frustrated because he didn't believe in cloture and wasn't so sure he liked oil depletion. Of course, it wasn't just oil depletion. The reason also that Carl Hayden felt along those lines was that we had a lot of depletion allowances in the mining area. We had them for years and years, so we sort of had an interest in how people felt about certain depletion allowances. Christ, when you start studying depletion, you found out that practically everyone in the country had some form of allowance, running from three percent to whatever it was in oil, which I guess was the highest. I know for the mines it was fifteen percent or something like that. And there were some good arguments for it, on both sides. There's no question in my mind that those sort of intangibles were considered when it came to making committee assignments. People who were protecting their interests did.

RITCHIE: Well, you mentioned also about Hayden being such a good head counter. Head counting seems to be the greatest skill you can have, I guess, on the

Senate floor, really knowing in advance what's going to happen. Which brings up the subject of Bobby Baker, who always gets credit for being one of the premier head counters.

ELSON: There's no question in my mind that Bobby was one of the best ever as a staff person, a non-elected person, better than most all the members. I mean, he was superb. Of course, Bobby was so consumed by politics. He started as a page, coming up from South Carolina, and I think his ambition—in fact, he told me this once—was to make a lot of money, not a Trump type, but enough money, and he wanted to be governor of South Carolina. Those were his goals, really that's where he wanted to end up. He went about trying to do both, but certainly to make some money. I think having been around, seeing the power, you know when Johnson picked him up as a young guy he even then had a reputation for knowing what the needs and wants of every senator were on both sides of the aisle, but certainly among the Democrats.

Bobby, being ambitious and very bright, and sitting there on the floor keeping track of everything, he had a very agile mind, and so when a member came on the floor, unless it got down to something the leadership really wanted to push through, he would tell a member, "You don't want to vote for this because of your interests back in your state," or something else. He, like Johnson, had an incredible memory for those little things that you wanted to try to help a member with, and letting him decide. He was very good. I know Carl Hayden was really impressed with his talents. And of course, Bobby went out of his way to court all that.

During the '50s my dealings with Bobby were pretty much official. Just checking on things, and sort of at a distance. It wasn't until later, in the late '50s, early '60s that I really became friends with him. We didn't socialize that much, occasionally. It was just before he got into trouble, and after he got into trouble, that I really became closer to him, up until this day. I just saw him not too long ago. Bobby's trouble, I think what got him into trouble a lot, was that being a very outgoing person, and sort of loud and flamboyant in his way, moving around, I think he talked too much—about what he could do, what money he was making, how he was going to do all these things. I know my own feeling at the time was that that's going to get you into some difficulty, particularly as a staff person around here.

In Bobby's defense, I think when you grew up as a sort of a child of the Senate, and with the power that he was around, and a man like Lyndon, and then of course his real mentor was Bob Kerr. In fact, I think if Kerr had lived there may not have been a Bobby Baker case, a court case and everything else. I just have a feeling that that might not have happened. But when you're around power like that you really do think that you might be invincible and above the normal laws that most people are supposed to take into consideration.

I think he felt that he could do most anything, and saw raw power at its best being exercised. So he courted the lobbyists. I remember, if you want to take an example, the Savings and Loan people. He became a very close friend of Glenn Troop, who was a lobbyist for the Savings and Loan people, and some of those in the defense thing. And he had no hesitation, and I think he got tips from Bob Kerr on business things, and he thought he could put deals together, and he had no compunctions about borrowing money, and using his power and position. But I really think how he got into difficulty was because he became so obvious. After a while they couldn't ignore some of his outside activities.

I'll tell you two stories about Bobby, leading up to his troubles. I met Bobby out in Beverly Hills on one trip. He had to raise some money, I guess this was for—it might have been for the senator's campaign. When did that all fall apart? Was it '62? So this might have been in '61.

RITCHIE: 1963 is actually when he got into real trouble, but in '62 it was beginning to brew.

ELSON: Yeah, but it was the fall of '62 as I recall when it began to break publicly, is that about right?

RITCHIE: Probably, yeah. The case really became public in '63. Kennedy was still alive and there was a question whether it would affect Johnson's place on the ticket.

ELSON: The next time, yes. Well, this would probably have been in '61 or might have been early '62. Anyhow, both of us were staying in the Beverly Rodeo

Hotel on Rodeo Drive, which is now the swank place in Beverly Hills. We met down in the bar. Bobby used to hang out at the Beverly Rodeo, there was, you know, lots of action there, [laughs] female action and other action. I met him downstairs and Wayne Bromley was with him. Wayne worked up here, he'd come up on patronage. I wanted to meet with Bobby, but I told him I didn't want to meet in Wayne's presence, because I never quite trusted Wayne. Well, I don't know what made me believe that, but I did. And so we went up alone to my suite. He had this money for me for the senator's campaign, probably. It turned out later, when the whole affair broke, was that they had turned Wayne and he was wired. Most of the stuff that they got him on came out of that wire that Wayne was wearing at the very time I was with Bobby. I've often looked back and thought, Oh, God! because we talked about a lot of things at that time.

The other thing was just before it broke. I had been out in Arizona, and all during the '60s my brother, Dean, was the agent in charge of the FBI in Nevada. At one time he probably knew more about organized crime than anyone in the country, and of course had that town wired like crazy—bugged, I should say. This was when Bobby Kennedy was Attorney General, and they had set up the special forces. But I flew up from Phoenix to Las Vegas to see my brother for the day, before I returned to Washington. It just so happened when I got up there that he said, "I've got to work tonight," because there was a middle-weight championship fight that night between Griffith and Martinez. So my brother said, "Why don't you come with me, because we're expecting all the hoods in from Chicago and Detroit and New York. I've got all my agents out and I have to be there. We'll go to see the fight and then we'll visit." Because I was catching the plane the next morning.

We're standing there at the entrance to the arena, the convention center where the fight was, and pretty soon here comes [Howard] Cannon, and Pete Williams, and [Alan] Bible, all of them, and then here comes [Fred] Black, Bobby Baker, and Carole Tyler. As they came through I'd say hello to them and I'd introduce my brother. When Bobby came through and I introduced him to Carole and the others, and Dean asked to be introduced to be some of these people. We watched the fight, and it was a good fight, and then we went to one of the hotels for breakfast, an early late-night breakfast. Anyhow, he said, "Roy, do you have any business dealings with Bobby Baker?" I said, "What do you mean business? I talk to him maybe once a day. He's the Secretary of the Majority." My brother said, "But I mean business." I said, "Do you mean am I in

business with him outside of my official duties for Senator Hayden?" I said, "You've got to be crazy, I wouldn't last two seconds with Carl Hayden if I had any outside business interests." I said, "No, I'm not." He said, "Well, keep it that way." I said, "Why? Is it over Fred Black?" Because I'd known about the stuff out here in Maryland and all that, because Bobby talked too much. I said, "You've got to tell me, you just can't leave me hanging like this." He said, "Just keep it totally official, believe me, because you just don't want to get involved." Well, this bothered me because I had loyalty to the Senate, and I knew the Bureau well enough, but I also knew my brother, that if he was on to something he's like a tenacious little bulldog and he just doesn't let go. He was good.

So when I came back to Washington, I thought, Oh, God, I know I told my brother I wouldn't say anything or indicate anything, but I finally called Bobby and said, "Can I come over and see you?" I went over went over to his office and said I wanted to see him alone. After everyone had left, I said, "Bobby, I don't know what the hell you're doing, although I think I have an idea about some, but if I were you whatever you're doing I would back off any outside business that you're into, I would back off as far as you can get." Then I told him why. He said, "Well, it's probably over Black and some income tax stuff." I said, "I don't know, I don't want to know. All I'm telling you is if I were you, and I was in your position—and knowing my brother—I would clean up my act." Well, I didn't think about it anymore. I felt better myself. And then the [expletive] hit the fan.

He told me later, it must have been a six months lapse, he said, "Roy, if I had only taken your advice at the time." There was time to distance and clean up some things. But he didn't, and it all went on. The only other thing I can say about that was that Carole Tyler was a very attractive lady, and I still have funny feelings about the way she died. I don't know that that was really an accident myself. At the time I had suspicions, and still do. But she's dead. But before that she was out of a job, so I talked to Carl Hayden. I said, "Can I hire her?" He said, "Yeah." Then I thought about it a little more, and here the old man is on the Rules Committee and they're looking into all this, and I thought, "I shouldn't put Carl Hayden into that position." But I almost hired Carole, because she was good, but I didn't on second thought—though the Bureau did tell me that they really didn't have anything against Carole, other than she was working for Bobby. Apparently she told the truth when she was subpoenaed.

But again, Bobby was an incredible Secretary to the Senate Majority. There haven't been too many people around here who were as good, and deliberately got involved. Sure there were the Les Biffles, and the Skeeters [Felton Johnston], and all those, but it was a little different then, particularly to be around a man like Lyndon who was into everything, and then to have someone as good as Bobby helping him. They were two of a kind, in many, many ways. They both had strong appetites, in both the flesh and other, and they just came along at the same time. And man that was a hell of a combination.

RITCHIE: Do you think that Bobby Baker was involved in outside financial dealings while Johnson was majority leader, or was this something that happened later?

ELSON: No, I think Bobby probably started under Lyndon. I really don't know, but I would suspect that it started when Lyndon was majority leader.

RITCHIE: In his memoir, Baker said it wasn't until Mansfield became majority leader and he had the time—that he was too busy when Johnson was leader.

ELSON: Oh, [expletive]! Baloney. No, I don't believe that at all. I'm almost positive. I'm trying to think about when he opened the Carousel [Motel]. That was about the time Senator Mansfield became leader, or right before, and putting all that together, hell, Lyndon was still there. I remember when he had that party and all the senators went down for the opening.

Well, talking about Bobby's book [*Wheeling and Dealing*], I was a little disappointed in reading it because here's a man who could tell you a lot about the inner workings of the Club, and certainly of the happenings of the floor, and the deals that were made in the cloakrooms and things like that. But he didn't say anything. I've told him this, that I was really disappointed, and his only explanation was: well, the lawyers, and he still had some law suits going involving Allen Frear, and the tax stuff and all that. But I was really disappointed. I hope that you do eventually get to have him put it on the record. He might be more willing now, now that he's back with his wife and everything, and is growing older, he might be willing. It would be a rich source of how that place worked.

RITCHIE: How would you describe him as an operator on the floor? Was he the type of person who would strong-arm a senator, or was he always a deferential person? What were the limits of his behavior?

ELSON: Well, he was a little more brazen than you would think that a staff member would be. It depended on who they were. And he was always taking care of some of their other needs too. I wouldn't say that he would "strong-arm" them because they were still United States senators, but he also became very friendly with them, almost an equal, and some more than others. If he felt could get a way with it, Bobby would. He sort of knew the limits he could go to. Now with Carl Hayden, for instance, he wouldn't try any of that. He treated him with a great deal of respect, but someone else that he might have been out drinking with, or having back to his office, or supplying him with something, he could be different. But he seemed to know how far he could go. And he was always very gregarious and an outgoing person, so they sort of accepted his personality that way, so he could probably get by with more than most. In telling stories and jokes and just the interplay that goes on between members, I think he shared a great deal of that same camaraderie with different ones, but with others, I don't think with a Russell or some others he would act that way.

What I must say, though, that he was very good at, was when Lyndon didn't want something to happen, Bobby could go around behind Mike Mansfield, when he was whip and trying to get something done, or thought that he was supposed to get something done, Bobby would sabotage the deal because Lyndon didn't want something done while he was out of town, wherever he was, down at the ranch or someplace else. Bobby was very good at cornering certain members and saying "We don't want this to happen." Certainly Senator Mansfield didn't quite trust him, for lots of reasons, but that was one of them, I'm sure. Bobby was carrying out Lyndon's work, and sometimes embarrassed Mike Mansfield. From that standpoint he could strong-arm, and did. But I put that more as loyalty to the leader, who may not have been perfectly candid with his assistant, meaning Mike Mansfield. In many ways Lyndon probably shared more information with the minority leader than he did with his own party people, on certain items. Bobby knew that.

But Bobby did everything, in the sense of running errands and cornering lobbyists. Bobby could read the riot act to some people, if they were outsiders. And I think a lot

of people resented it, so when he got into trouble, there wasn't the support that he might have had, had he treated people better, particularly other staff people. He could be very short with them. He was never that way with me that I can recall, ever, but I've seen him with other staff members who were in the same position I was, AA. You never quite felt sure that Bobby was always sincere. The one example I can give, I remember some function he had invited me to, I'll never forget it, there were a lot of members there as well as lobbyists and some foreign dignitaries, and I wanted to talk to Bobby. Anyhow, have you ever had the sensation when you're shaking hands with someone, he had a good firm handshake, but he was also—just like Lyndon used to do—pulling you by him and looking at the next person. You never quite felt it was anything more than he had to do it and good-bye, get out of my way.

A lot of staff people around here, I know, felt resentment for his flamboyance and his talking too much about his extracurricular activities. He'd brag about his prowess and things like that. You never knew how much of it was true and how much of it was b.s. He was a little high-handed with a number of staff people, and I know they didn't like it. A lot of people were always bitching about him, but he always had that protective power over there behind, particularly Bob Kerr.

RITCHIE: What about Kerr? How would you describe his role in all of this?

ELSON: In Bobby's thing?

RITCHIE: Yes.

ELSON: Well, Kerr generally liked Bobby and wanted to help him. He probably saw something in Bobby that he didn't see in his own family, that's just a personal theory of mine. He helped him in many ways, loaned him money, and showed him how to do things, and gave him lots of tips and insight. You know, Kerr spread some cash around to members, a little spending money here and there. He was also looking out for the interests of his state, but wasn't he who said, "If I'm not a part of the deal, I'm against it."

I loved Bob Kerr. I thought he was just fascinating to watch operate. He knew how to use money and power. But he had this admiration for Bobby, and liked him, and

really did help him. I feel very strongly that if he had lived, there might not have been any of that "Bobby Baker affair" coming up quite the way it did. He might have had to change some things, or move on, or something else, but it wouldn't have been the same.

RITCHIE: I'm struck by the number of business arrangements that Baker had that involved other senators, real estate and stocks and this and that. Was that a common practice for senators and staff to invest in the same things?

ELSON: If it was, I must have been in a total fog. I know that there were certain staff people who did have arrangements, or got involved with members. Of course, like Ernest McFarland got his television station being on that committee. So did Lyndon. So business and official duties did get mixed up on occasion. I can think of several staff people who did have outside interests, and interest with senators, but I don't think it was a common practice. I sure didn't know about that many at the time. In fact, I think there's probably more today than there perhaps was then. There were some, but Bobby was on a fast-track. He wanted to get there in a hurry.

Bobby in a way was a sort of amoral type. Not immoral, but amoral. If it worked, fine, if you could get away with it. I don't know that he consciously thought that he was above the law, but he certainly behaved like he was above it, and felt that with power that was the way you got ahead, and that's the way it was done in the business world. Maybe to some extent he was right. But I guess the reason why I wasn't looking that much—and as I say I know for certain of a number of individuals who had outside business, and also with members—but in my particular case it would have been unheard of to have outside interests of any kind with Carl Hayden. You could buy a house or something like that, just like any other normal human being. I'm sure that there were staff people who got stock tips and things like that, as members did, and inside information that way. Unfortunately, I never had those opportunities.

But Bobby was putting together deal after deal, and what amazed me, I thought I worked hard, but I just didn't know how in the hell he found the time for all these outside activities. He was always on the phone, always had a deal going on, always had someone in the office, he was always late or waiting for someone. He was like Lyndon in that way. He was going twenty-four hours a day. And he liked to drink and play, there were some wild, wild parties he put together, or was involved in. Anyone who

has that sort of stamina you have to admire. As I said, I thought I worked twenty hours a day, but he had lots of energy. He always had something going, but you also sort of felt—and I'm saying this all very friendly—but when he talked to you it was always like it was a big secret. Then the next thing you know you heard him telling the same thing to someone else, always whispering. I think he was acting more like Lyndon than Lyndon himself. He took on a lot of the mannerisms. But he had a lot of them to start with. He was a southerner and had some of that southern charm. But you always thought you were getting some of the inside information. He was also very good at giving you enough information that he felt you needed to maybe do your job officially, and also enough to manipulate you a little bit. He was skilled, still is. He was very good. And being that combination with Johnson, it was just awesome.

Every time I've seen him, this year I met with him for lunch, and he still has a very good mind, and he still has great insights into politics and how things happen, both nationally and internationally. He's quick at picking up trends. I think that's from those years of experience that he gained. He was good then, he had good political instincts.

RITCHIE: Do you have the sense that he misses politics?

ELSON: Yeah. I think going to prison was not an easy thing. On any man or any person that would take a lot out of him, but I think it hurt him a lot. I don't know that he's recovered from not only the humiliation, but just—though he was up here in Allenwood—[laughs] when I was out chasing the hoods I met some people who knew Bobby when he was there. I could tell you some interesting stories about that. I think that hurt him. He might have been a little cynical back then, but I think that though some cynicism has come into him he still has the flash. He's mellowed a lot, and he's had some difficult times financially, still very proud man. How can you not miss it if you've been in a position of power and around the type of power and the men that he was around?

He was involved in Johnson's attempt to get the nomination, playing all those games. And having grown up in this place, and your whole life has revolved around power politics, I don't see how anyone could not miss being at the top of the mountain. I would probably say, and I think it was old Wilson Meisner who said, "You'd better

remember the people on the way up, because you're going to be seeing them on the way down." In Bobby's case, he forgot some of that. So when he was on the way down, I think a lot of people turned on him. But hell, yeah, he still loves talking about it, and laughs about it. That's why I would urge you, if you can, to get him to talk. He's got a super memory for a lot of the names and faces and times and events. I know I've talked with him privately, but I've never seen him put anything in writing. He certainly would give you some great one-liners on each senator that served over there during his time, from the time he was a page until he left up here. Because he did know all their little idiosyncrasies.

RITCHIE: You described him at one point as amoral. I wondered how you would describe him in terms of ideology. Did he have one? Was he a liberal or a conservative? Or was he just a political operator?

ELSON: No, his own personal philosophy I would put in the liberal camp, really. But he was also an operator. Yeah, I think he had some convictions. I guess "amoral" would be too strong. He could submerge himself into doing things for other people. He was almost sycophantic that way, you might say, in finding out things and working for members. You had a tendency, I remember when I sat down when I was urged to run myself, and I had been thinking in Carl Hayden's terms for so damn long. All of a sudden when I finally sat down, I said, "Jesus, what do I believe in?" Because you have so totally submerged your own personality into your senator's. Particularly in those days, because outside of a guy like Bobby and some others, it was very rare for an AA to find his name in the paper. You were never out in front. In fact, that was a mark that you weren't doing your job well, if your name showed up in the paper instead of your member's. And it better be a favorable way.

I remember my own feeling was: "Jesus, I don't even know who I am anymore!" Then I started thinking: "My God, I don't agree with Carl Hayden on that!" In some cases I'd be more liberal, and in others I'd be more conservative, when I started thinking, "Well, what do I really believe?" I think in someone like Bobby's case, he had submerged himself and his personality into so many other people's thoughts and bodies, that he wasn't sure who in the hell he was, and moving as fast as he was. That's probably what I mean about being "amoral." I don't know how to describe it, because a lot of us certainly had our shortcomings when it came to morality. You know, it's

amazing all the things you're asked to do for a member, and do, that you probably wouldn't do under normal circumstances. That's what I think I mean by being amoral.

But in the private conversations I've had with him, he believed in Civil Rights legislation, and in social matters he had a social conscience. I think he would have been a hell of a governor and quite a good elected official, particularly in the executive branch, though he would also have been good in this body. He was very forward-looking and progressive. Occasionally you would find him identifying with something because of an upbringing where he didn't have any wealth. He really wanted that, because he saw wealth—not so much wealth in itself, though he liked the high life, I guess we all do to an extent—but I don't think it was money in itself. Like for instance, I don't think he wanted to make money for money's sake, or to be rich. It was always a means to his goal, which was always power. I think his real goal was he wanted to be governor of South Carolina and then who knows from there what he wanted to do.

I always enjoyed those occasions when we'd talk privately about politics and his own political philosophy. He was a good, progressive-looking Democrat. Yet he had submerged himself so many times on so many things, and he was an operator, the best. So, as a result, it's hard to say if you look at him from the outside how he'd come across. I think he'd come across as a wheeler-dealer, with no personal philosophy whatsoever. The expedient. But I think he had some deeply held convictions. I think still down deep always recognized though that he was still—like all of us—still just a staff man. We were not an elected United States senator.

RITCHIE: So perhaps what he was looking for, if he was thinking about becoming governor, was some status and standing?

ELSON: Right. I believe that. And enough money to go do it the right way, to make sure that he was going to win. So it was all part of an overall plan. The money and the outside interests were to promote that goal that he had. Though a lot of us took it all very seriously, we also had fun along the way, and he was a believer in that philosophy, so he had fun while he was doing all this, which was another amazing thing, that he had all this extracurricular activity going on and still played as much as he did. They sort of went hand-in-hand, together with being a good, loyal, hard working, and responsible staff member of the Senate. But I really do think that the

outside interests were really to get him where he wanted to go, and he wanted to get there as fast as he could. I think he had hoped to be governor by the time he was forty. He told me once, but I'm not sure, but he had a long-range plan. He was going to take advantage of the opportunities that came along, and tried to.

At the same time you could see these seeds of his own downfall: number one of talking too much, and drawing a lot of resentment to him because of the way he treated his fellow staff members. Staff members have a way of—they identify as members [laughs]—and I think he hurt a lot of feelings, maybe not deliberately, but a lot of them resented what he was doing, so they poisoned the mind of a lot of senators, particularly on the liberal side. And I'm talking about Democrats now. But I know most of my fellow AAs for the most part respected the job that Bobby did. Some worked with him a lot closer than others, and plainly a lot of it depended on the member you were with, what you could do and not do. But he was, and still is, a remarkable character. I just hope you can get him to talk.

RITCHIE: Could you tell me a little about his Quorum Club, at the Carroll Arms?

ELSON: Well, yeah [laughs], quite a bit. I remember when they set it up. They wanted me to join, and I said, "I don't want any part of it." I mean, I went there often, but I didn't want to be a member, mainly because I thought it was a conflict in a way. It was really all catering to lobbyists. It was going to be the little private place where they could meet with members. I just didn't like the way the whole thing was put together. I thought it was eventually going to backfire. Although, you know it went from the Quorum Club to the 116, and it's still the 116 although it's moved from [116] Shotts Alley [current site of the Hart Senate Office Building].

A lot of Senate staff members did join. You got a special rate, and discount. Lobbyists were the ones who got hit the hardest, but it was mainly for their benefit. And Bobby was using it to promote his own interests, and to some extent it has its value, in that it's a chance for members to meet, and bring members, and have private luncheons and things like that. But it was a little more than that. There were poker games, and girls, and other things.

RITCHIE: It was basically just a bar and dining room that was upstairs from the public rooms?

ELSON: It was upstairs. At the Carroll Arms hotel you went down some steps into the dining room and the bar, and then you went up a half flight of steps to a sort of mezzanine or second floor. When you came in off the corner there, it wasn't a full flight down or a full flight up. It was located up there on the second floor. It wasn't very big. It was mainly a room and a little bar, and I think he maybe had another little room. You could have lunches there, but it was all served from the dining room downstairs. And then they had the bar. In the evenings it would be mainly drinking and maybe a game. And sometimes if they wanted more privacy, they'd get a room over there. I guess I told you about them making the adult movie—did we put that on the record?

RITCHIE: You mentioned something about that. That was, I suppose, even uncommon for there!

ELSON: That was even uncommon for those days. It was the most incredible thing I'd ever seen in my life—no, not really, but it certainly was one of them. That was Bobby's. I'm sure if you talk to ten other guys who knew Bobby, you'll have different feelings, because he was into so many things. But it would be something like that which would give you that feeling that he maybe had questionable ethics and morals.

RITCHIE: But the Quorum Club was sort of a convenient place to get people off from the Senate proper.

ELSON: Yeah, and gave the lobbyists a chance, and all their friends that they dealt with, a place to be close that they could go without having to go down into the restaurant. It was one or the other. You went there, or down to the Plaza, or the Monocle—which started in 1960—they were the only three places that you could go close by.

RITCHIE: Were there a number of senators who went regularly?

ELSON: Oh, sure. I was trying to think of a few who would be over there, but there were always those that you knew liked to drink a little bit, and it was a great place to get a free drink, and a place to relax. And a lot of funny things were going on about that time. I told you about the whorehouse that was up the street. Oh, I didn't? Oh, yeah. Well, when we get around to talking about some of the intelligence stuff, I think I'll tell you about that.

The Quorum Club really benefited the lobbyists more than anyone else. They tried to promote it as an exclusive place, I think they limited the membership when it first started out to a hundred or something like that, and you were supposed to be the wheelers and dealers, and have a chance to meet with the lobbyists. So it was pretty good.

End of Interview #4